

A CHRISTMAS PROMISE

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COSY CORNER SERIES

CAROLINE E. JACOBS



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A CHRISTMAS PROMISE

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"SURELY THERE SHE MUST FIND SOMETHING"

Frontispiece

✓ The Cozy Corner Series

A CHRISTMAS PROMISE

BY

CAROLINE E. ^{milis}JACOBS

Author of "A Texas Blue Bonnet," "The
Christmas Surprise Party," etc.

Illustrated by

JOSEPHINE BRUCE ✓



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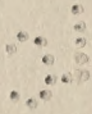
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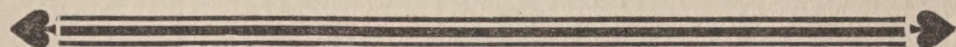
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A Christmas Promise



CHAPTER I

BETTY IS TROUBLED

BETTY stood in the doorway looking up at the mountains; they seemed very near in the clear, frosty air; and—she caught her breath—the snow had come at last in good earnest. It had seemed to Betty, as if it never would come this year. Perhaps, even now, down further South where Dad was—

But it was only three weeks to Christmas, and Dad had promised— Yes, she might look for him any day now. And

Betty went back to her breakfast preparations quite cheerfully.

In the little loft over the kitchen Joe and Jim were scrambling into their clothes; and from the bedroom, at one side, came the sound of an animated discussion.

"I tell you, Stella 'Vang'line Flynn," a shrill little voice was declaring, "Dad promised! Didn't he say to me—and me standing there at the foot of the path, and Joe and Jim there to hear him—'You run 'long home, Katie dear, and mind what Betty says, and I'll be back come Christmas, and then there'll be doings'?"

But eight-year-old Stella had a streak of caution in her, certainly not inherited from the Flynn side of the house. "Ain't he never promised that afore, Katie?" she asked.

"And what if he has?" Katie protested. "And maybe they wasn't just really, truly promises—those others."

"Then—" Stella began.

But Katie waited to hear no more, coming like a small, indignant whirlwind to have Betty button her dress. "Betty," she pleaded, "you think Dad'll be back 'fore Christmas—don't you, Betty?"

"Sure," her sister answered; "I'm looking for him 'most any day."

And Katie bobbed her head triumphantly at the unbelieving Stella standing in the bedroom doorway.

But after the children had gone to school that morning, and the little cabin was in order, Betty's hopes began to ebb.

Despite her will, Stella's question—"Ain't he never promised that afore, Katie?"—would ring and re-ring through her thoughts.

Hadn't Dad been promising ever since she could remember—now one thing, now another?

Some day, when he made his strike, they would all see! And so indomitable was the man's own hope, his own belief in final success, that each time those promises had rung true.

She had believed them, when a child of Katie's age; had believed him this last time, when standing in the doorway of the little cabin he had said good-by, before starting off on this latest prospecting trip.

"Mind, Betty," he had told her, "I'm like to make it this time; luck's got to turn soon; such a Christmas as we'll have then, Betty." And down at the foot of the trail he had met Katie and the boys. If only he hadn't promised them—at least, hadn't promised Katie.

Betty's work-worn fingers bungled over the threading of her needle, then, as if in regular sequence, came the memory of something her mother had said once: "You're not to go blaming him, Betty; it's in the blood of him. Who knows, maybe some day he will make his strike? Then there'll be naught too good for you children—and if he don't—"

That had been three years before—three years in which Betty had been the house mother. It had been the same all these three years—would be the same next year, and the next, and the next.

Betty's stitches were far from even just then. She knew what they were saying down there in the camp—about a man who only worked long enough to provide his family with the barest necessities during his absence, and then was off for

months at a time, prospecting; leaving a parcel of children to look after themselves.

Betty sprang up; she would finish mending the jacket another time. She would run down to the store. Perhaps there might be a letter. Dad had sent a letter once.

But there was no letter; and it seemed to Betty as if all the women in the little mining camp had chosen this particular morning to do their shopping in.

"Good-morning, Betty," one after the other said; and more than one added, "Father home yet?"

They were all, Betty told herself, buying something for the coming Christmas; the place was full of the scent of the raisins and spices. Mrs. Daly was buying for her mincemeat. And right in the center of the store stood a great box of

Christmas goods, just opened. Mrs. Clew was bending over it, choosing a doll for Nelly.

Betty ran out of the store and back up the trail home. She would not cry—the children would be back to dinner before long.

They came in before she had finished setting the table. "Betty," Katie cried, hopping excitedly about the room, "Sally Martin says they're going to have a tree; so I just told her *we* was, too."

"Yes," Stella took up the story, "Katie's been going 'bout bragging how we're going to have the finest Christmas in camp—just's if ev'ry one didn't know we never have any."

"Stella!" Betty cried, hurt as much by Stella's unbelief as by Katie's too fervent faith.

"Didn't I tell you, Stella 'Vang'line

Flynn," Katie broke in, "that this year—"

"But Katie, darling," Betty interposed, "Dad never meant that we were to have a really grand Christmas."

There was more than a touch of red in Katie's thick thatch of curls. "'Liz'beth G'raldine Flynn," she exclaimed fiercely; "don't real Christmas 'doings' mean a tree?"

"Sometimes, Katie."

"And nuts?"

"Well—mostly."

"And candy?"

"I—reckon so."

"And presents?"

"I suppose so. But, Katie," Betty stooped to put her arms about the child, "maybe Dad won't make the strike this trip. Why, Katie, perhaps he won't be able to get back. Darling, you won't be too disappointed if—"



"THE USUAL MID-DAY MEAL."

“Yes, I will. You needn’t go thinking I won’t, Betty!”

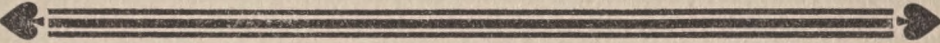
And Betty turned away to fill four bowls with the hot soup which, with bread, formed the usual mid-day meal.

She waited to eat her own dinner until the children had gone back to school; and as she ate it, Betty wondered what she ought to do. Should she let Katie go blindly on, believing in that Christmas which, through Betty’s fourteen years, had always seemed just ahead of her, like some veritable will-o’-the-wisp; or would it be wiser to—

Betty pushed her bowl aside, and leaning her chin in her folded hands stared with troubled eyes at the tumbled, snow-capped peaks beyond. Katie wasn’t strong—and she had so set her heart on this; it wouldn’t matter quite so much with Stella and the boys; they were older

and—different. The doctor himself had said that Katie wasn't strong—that they must be careful of her.

If only Dad would come; and when old Ponto, asleep behind the stove, stirred uneasily, Betty ran to the window, half hoping, half expecting to see her father coming up the trail.



CHAPTER II

THE PROMISE

CHRISTMAS came on Friday that year. On Monday afternoon Katie came rushing in from school, her whole little body quivering with excitement.

"'Liz'beth G'raldine Flynn!" she cried; "do you know that there's only *two* trees left down at the store?"

"Where's Stella, Katie?" Betty asked, fencing for time.

"I ain't talking 'bout Stella. Just *two* trees left. Dear me, Betty, why ain't you starting right off?"

"Katie, darling, I haven't—any money to buy trees with."

"Dad'll pay for it when he comes."

Betty bent over her stocking basket; it took a long time to find the pair she wanted.

Katie watched her in silence for a moment; for the first time something of doubt crept in to undermine the child's confidence in that coming Christmas; suddenly, she threw herself down on the floor in a perfect passion of tears.

Kneeling beside her, Betty tried to comfort her; "Katie, darling, Dad will be here—oh, he must, Katie; and anyway, you shall have your Christmas, Katie, I—promise it."

Katie looked up, a ray of hope brightening her small, tear-stained face. Betty never broke promises.

"You see, dear," Betty gathered the



“KNEELING BESIDE HER, BETTY TRIED TO COMFORT
HER”

forlorn little figure in her arms, "it wouldn't do to begin too soon; but, of course, if Dad doesn't get here—I—I'll have to keep his promise for him."

"And you'll see 'bout the tree right now?"

"I can't to-night, dear."

"Can't you send Joe soon's he comes in?"

Betty rubbed her cheek against Katie's. "Listen, darling; half the fun of Christmas is in the *not* knowing about things. You don't want to ask, or try to find out about what I'm doing, else you won't have the fun of being surprised when Christmas comes."

Katie nodded comprehendingly. "I—I won't ask 'nother single thing; and I'll tell Stella not to, and the boys." She was up and off on the instant to meet and caution the rest.

Betty watched her go, an anxious look in her gray eyes. "I just *had* to promise," she said, slowly; "and now I've *got* to keep it some way."



CHAPTER III

PLOTTING AND PLANNING

“**B**ETTY,” Joe said the next morning, finding her alone in the kitchen, “what’s wrong?”

Joe was twelve, and he had much of Betty’s habit of accepting the responsibilities of life. Betty had long ago made him her chief counselor. Now, as she stirred up the griddle cakes for breakfast, she told him of the difficulty she was in.

Joe whistled. “How much tin can you scrape together?” he asked.

And Betty stopped to count, just as if

she had not counted and recounted her resources since yesterday afternoon. The smallness of the sum she named made Joe whistle again. "I say," he began.

"Please don't say it," Betty implored, "or I—I'll cry right into the batter; and I'm afraid it's too salt now."

Joe laughed. "Oh, I reckon you'll weather us through somehow."

His very confidence in her seemed to make Betty's burden weigh heavier. She kept up a brave front, however, until the last child had gone to school; then, right in the midst of dish-washing, she flung herself face down on the old lounge, and cried her heart out.

At which Ponto, who was nearly as old as Betty herself, and had been playmate, friend and protector as long as they could both remember, grew nearly desperate. He had done his best at comforting, re-

monstrating, pleading, had thrust his cold black nose in under the hands covering Betty's face; and at last, finding all else fail, he planted his forefeet firmly on the lounge and, throwing back his head, howled dismally.

It was such a comical combination of sympathy and personal woe that Betty's sobs ended in a hysterical burst of laughter, whereupon Ponto wagged his tail delightedly.

Betty put her arms about the dog's neck, and looked wistfully down into the wise old eyes. "Ponto, you think Dad'll be back soon?" she asked.

Ponto blinked gravely.

"You're not sure? Then, Ponto, I'll have to go ahead and manage some way, won't I?"

Ponto wagged.

"I reckon if we want to have things

very much we just have to *do* them," Betty decided, as she went back to her dish-washing.

The water was cold and the fire down; by the time things were in working trim again Betty was humming softly to herself. All at once she remembered that it was a tune her mother had been used to sing; and bit by bit the words themselves came back to her:

"Once in royal David's city
 Stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid a baby
 In a manger for His bed;
Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ, her little child."

Betty stood quite still a moment, her hands over her eyes; not praying, hardly thinking—only feeling sure, in some indefinable way, that the One who had come as a child to that lowly stable, on that first

Christmas, so long ago—to the stable that could not have been much more lowly, more humble than this little hillside cabin—would help her to make Christmas for these other children, who wanted it so much.

Betty went about her work bravely, but very thoughtfully, for the rest of the morning.

Joe didn't come home to dinner; and there was an air of mystery about the three other children that promptly roused Betty's curiosity, as it was meant to do.

"Only you can't know yet, Betty," Katie warned her.

"It isn't mischief, Betty," Stella added reassuringly.

"Betty," Katie followed her sister into the pantry, "he—Dad'll have to get here soon—to be in time."

“Oh, there’s heaps of time yet,” Betty declared; “two whole days and a half.”

As soon as the dinner things were cleared away Betty went into the little cold best room, where, in one corner, covered with a shawl, stood the old flat trunk that fifteen years before had come out from that mysterious “back East,” about which her mother had loved to tell.

The trunk and its contents were Betty’s own; her father had given them to her soon after her mother’s death; and to the girl there was something almost sacred about the few simple treasures her mother had held so dear.

The thought of the trunk had come to Betty that morning—surely there she must find something.

And presently, she had laid aside a little shell-covered box for Stella, who could be trusted to be careful of it; a

string of tiny sea shells for Katie, tied with a bit of faded pink ribbon; her mother's old third reader, in its worn calico cover, for Jim; and for Joe, the scrap-book Mrs. Flynn had made when a girl.

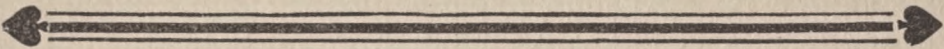
Betty drew a quick breath of relief; to have made a beginning was something; the coming Christmas began to take definite form.

On Christmas Day they would have a fire in here in the open fireplace. "And Ponto," Betty had gone back to the kitchen shivering with cold. "I'm going to make a pudding! Most likely there'll be the 'Company's turkey,' but this year there are going to be fixings besides."

She got her mother's old recipe book; to make the whole rule was out of the question, or even one-half. She was figuring up the cost—supposing she reduced the

rule to thirds—when a shout outside sent her hurrying to the window.

Coming up the trail were the four children, Joe in front, the smallest of those two last Christmas trees over his shoulder.



CHAPTER IV

JOE'S TREE

THAT Christmas tree required explanation, and the two boys began to explain at once.

"You see," said Joe, "I—"

"It's Joe's," cried Jim. "He—"

"It's Betty's, too," maintained Jim, "'cause she—"

"Yes, but you—"

"Gracious me, boys," interrupted Betty, while the two little girls jumped up and down with excitement, "can't one of you keep quiet and let the other talk? Bring

the tree into the house, and then, Joe, you tell me all about it."

And so, while Betty gazed happily at the tree, Joe told the story.

After all, there was not much to tell. He had felt that he must help Betty to keep her promise, but had not known just what to do. After school he had, with the other children, drifted down to the store to gaze at the Christmas fixings. Little Katie had begun to cry when she saw that there was only one Christmas tree left, and then and there he had made up his mind that in some way he would get this last tree.

Just then Mr. Carlin, the storekeeper, came up, and asked them in his most businesslike manner if they desired to make any purchases. Mr. Carlin's smile was so friendly that, before Joe knew it, he was telling him all about the Christmas

that Betty had promised them, and how he wanted to surprise her with a Christmas tree, but had no money to buy it.

Perhaps Mr. Carlin was touched at the wistful glances of the little group; perhaps he thought of his own children; at any rate, he had told Joe that if he wished he could work the rest of that day in the store, and as his pay he could take home the tree. This was why Joe had not come home to dinner, and this was why the three other children were so excited and so mysterious, and this was why the four of them had trooped home so happily carrying the tree with them.

After supper was eaten and the table cleared, Betty started again to figure on the receipt for the wonderful Christmas pudding that she planned.

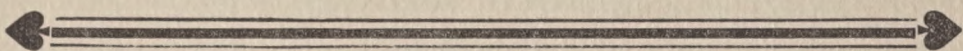
She usually had time to herself after the little girls had gone to bed, and while

the boys were studying their lessons; but that night Stella and Katie were so excited that they declared they could not "sleep a wink," and wanted to sit up and talk over the wonderful Christmas which Betty had promised them.

Finally, in despair, Betty offered to tell them a story, if they would promise to go to bed quietly and go to sleep "quick" as soon as she was finished.

Katie promptly climbed into her lap and demanded that she should tell "Mother's Story" of Great-grandfather Pool and his pullet.

In vain Betty protested that she had told that story so often that Katie knew it by heart. Still Katie persisted, and finally Betty gave in and began the story that their mother had once told them of one Christmas "back East" when she was a little girl, and, as always, Betty tried to tell it in her mother's own words.



CHAPTER V

GRANDFATHER POOL AND THE PULLET

GRANDFATHER POOL was a very tender-hearted man, and next to his love of children was that of animals.

There used to be a season in the village which was called "killing-time,"—a few weeks in December when the fatted cattle, hogs, and poultry were killed. The neighbors used to gather from house to house on the occasion of such annual slaughters, but the parson was never seen among them. If he were riding at this season and heard one of his neighbor's

pigs squeal on being run down by the butcher, he would put the reins between his knees, and clap both hands over his ears, and hold them there tightly.

"Mary," I once heard him say, after such an experience, "it does seem to me that there is something wrong in the make-up of this world; but then," he added, "I ought not to say anything,—I like a piece of fresh pork myself sometimes."

The people generally remembered the parson at "killing-time," and generously sent him spare-ribs, turkeys, and geese. He was so well provided for with poultry at this season by others, that he was never known to kill any of his own.

"I wouldn't kill a chicken," he used to say, "if I had to live on corn bread all the year. I sell all my poultry to the hen-cart."

Just what the hen-cart man did with the parson's poultry, the good man never cared to investigate.

Grandmother Pool was a person of different fiber. At "killing-time" at the parsonage, she went round with her sleeves rolled up, ready for the fray.

Parson Pool liked to raise poultry. He would often bring up a large brood of chickens by hand, and his flock of hens would follow him about the farm whenever he went out to walk. In the summer afternoons we used to go up on a hill together, which commanded almost as fine a view of the Green Mountain walls and the bald summits of Washington and Lafayette as does the Bald Mountain itself. Then we would sit down and watch the shadows of the clouds on the pine-covered mountain sides, as they sailed along like ghosts of the air. When

Grandmother Pool asked us where we were going, as we set out for these excursions, he would often answer, "Hens' nesting."

A mania had spread over the country. It was called the "hen fever." It reached at last our village. Several people became the possessors of Cochin China and Shanghai hens, and among them was a brisk young farmer by the name of Campbell.

Just after Thanksgiving this young man summoned Parson Pool to marry him. He paid the old man two dollars in money, and promised to make him a present of a Christmas dinner, which he assured him should be "a surprise."

On the day before Christmas young Campbell called at the parsonage, and fulfilled his promise. It was a surprise indeed,—a Shanghai chicken of aston-

ishing weight, and seemingly fabulous length of neck and legs.

“Here, parson,” said he, setting the pullet down on the kitchen floor, “I’ve brought you something for your Christmas dinner. Big as a turkey, ain’t it? Legs almost as long as yours, parson, and a neck like as it was going to peek over the meetin’ hus’ into the graveyard. Did you ever see the like of that?”

The chicken ruffled its feathers, and walked about the kitchen very calmly, lifting high its feet in a very dignified way.

“‘When this you see, remember me,’ parson,” said the lively young man, quoting provincial poetry. “You will have *him* on the table to-morrow, won’t you, parson?”

“Yes; but, but—”

The old man held out a piece of bread.

The pullet walked up to it like a child, and swallowed it so fast that it choked desperately.

“But what, parson?”

The pullet wiped her bill on grandfather's dressing-gown, which seemed to please him greatly.

“But I would kind o' hate to cut her head off.”

“Is that so, parson? Well, I'll save you the trouble. You just let me take your hatchet, and I'll—”

“No, no,” said grandfather, with a distressed look, “I'll attend to the matter. I'll attend to the matter. I always was kind o' chicken-hearted, myself.”

After the young man left, grandmother came upon the scene, with a resolute look in her face and her cap borders flying.

“Samuel!”

“Well?”

"I want you to cut that chicken's head right off, right off now, so that I can have it to bake for breakfast to-morrow. Who do you think is coming to spend Christmas with us? Sophia,—Sophia Van Buren, from Boston. She spent the summer at the Crawford House, and came to the mountains again in October. But now that the hotels are closed, she is coming here."

"What is *she* coming for?" asked grandfather, with a distressed look at the chicken.

"To see Mount Washington covered with snow. She is an artist; she exhibits pictures in the art rooms in Boston. She is my second cousin."

"When is she coming?"

"This very afternoon, in the Ossipee stage. So just take that great fat chicken, and off with its head just as quick as you

can, and I will get the feathers out of the way in half an hour."

"But I never killed a chicken in my life, and I would rather hate to hack the head off of such a fine-looking bird as that."

"Won't she *brown* up well?" said grandmother.

"Rebecca, that fowl loves to live just as well as you do. Just think of it, when the day-star rises to-morrow and the cocks crow, she—"

"Will be dead and baked in the larder," said Grandmother Pool.

"And when the sun rises and the other fowls are enjoying the sunlight—"

"You will be eating one of the best roast chickens you ever tasted. Here she is," added grandmother, catching up the plump pullet and handing her to Grandfather Pool, who looked as though

he had been called upon to execute a child.

Grandfather Pool went out with the pullet, which did not seem to manifest any concern. I followed. He went to the woodhouse where the chopping-block was, and sat down in an old arm-chair, in the sun. The woodhouse was open in front, and the chopping-block stood in the opening.

"Are you really going to do it?" said I.

"I wish one of those Old Testament miracles would turn that pullet into a chopping-block, for *she* has said it must be done, and nothing but a miracle will ever save the poor thing."

Grandfather Pool rose up and laid the chicken on the block. He measured the distance with the hatchet.

"Oh, let me run," said I.

"I am not going to do it yet," said he. "When I do, I shall measure the distance so, with my eyes open; then I shall shut my eyes tight, chop her head off quick, and throw her away, and shall not open my eyes until she is as dead as a stone. Now you run away," he added, with a grim smile.

I ran to my room. It looked out on the woodhouse. At first, I drew the curtain so as not to see the awful sight; but, finally, I peeped out, to see if the deed was done.

A most remarkable sight met my eyes. Grandfather Pool stood by the block on which the pullet was laid, measuring the distance to strike. He then shut his eyes, brought down the hatchet strongly, and threw the pullet away. What was my astonishment to see the fowl jump up and run across the meadow into the hemlocks.

Grandfather stood like a statue, with closed eyes, waiting for the pullet to expire. I think he stood in this position some five minutes, when he ventured to look slowly round.

There was nothing to be seen but the chopping-block.

He walked around it, and then surveyed the yard. I never saw such a look of astonishment as came into his face.

Presently I heard a shrill voice cry,—

“Samuel, ain’t that chicken ready yet?”

Then I heard him say,—

“Rebecca, come here.”

“Where is the pullet, Samuel?”

“I chopped her head off, when she vanished right into the chopping-block. It is a punishment for my sins. I never thought it quite right to kill innocent animals for food.”

“Samuel, have you lost your senses? I am not a fool. You never cut that pullet’s head off in this world. It stands to reason you didn’t; there isn’t a drop of blood on the block.”

“Rebecca, I have never told a lie. I tell you the truth: I cut that pullet’s head off; the hatchet went clean through her neck, when she vanished head and all,—went right into the chopping-block!”

“Split open the block and you will find her, then.”

Grandfather took up the broad-axe, severed the chopping-block in the middle, and examined it carefully as it fell apart.

“There is no pullet there,” said he. “I feel like Balaam. I’ve read of such things in books.”

“What things?”

“Supernatural things,—miracles, like.”

"Well, I don't believe in them."

"What's come of that pullet, then?"

"Didn't you fall asleep over the chopping-block, and some one steal her?"

"Rebecca, you know that there isn't a person in this whole town who would steal a hen from me in the night, to say nothing of broad daylight. What's the use of arguing against the supernatural? Just as soon as I had cut her head off, I let go of her, and expected she would flutter and leap up into the air, just as pullets do when other folks kill them. Instead of that she never made a sound, but turned right into that there chopping-block, and never left so much as a drop of blood or a feather behind."

"It is very mysterious."

"Very."

Just then the sound of wheels was heard, and the Ossipee stage stopped be-

fore the little red cottage, and Miss Van Buren, all fluffs and furbelows, appeared. As soon as I was alone with grandfather he said,—

“Dearie, you know what has happened; don’t tell your grandmother that rash wish of mine.”

“What wish?”

“What I said to you before the pullet vanished,—that she might turn into a chopping-block.”

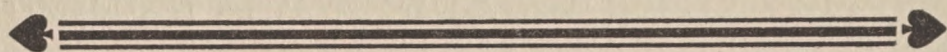
I had intended to tell him what I had seen, but a mystery had a charm for me even in childhood. I disliked to spoil such a famous story as this was sure to become, and when my conscience began to trouble me, I stifled it by reflecting that to explain the matter too soon would cause the capture and death of the pullet.

The next day, a wonderfully mild Christmas in that region, grandfather,

Miss Van Buren, and myself, went up the high hill to get a view of the mountains. The air was very still, only a low murmur at times in the tops of the pines.

There were hunters in the woods below us, and from time to time the crack of a rifle would cause us to stop to listen to the echoes. As we returned, I hurried ahead of grandfather and Miss Van Buren, and gained the highway some minutes before them.

A wagon was passing, full of hunters and game. Out of one of the game bags hung the head of a noble bird; my eyes recognized it with astonishment,—it was Parson Pool's Christmas pullet.



CHAPTER VI

FULFILLING THE PROMISE

AFTER the rest were in bed that evening Betty and Joe held council. Thanks to Joe, the tree, at least, was a blessed certainty.

"It'll have to be trimmed," Betty said; once, several years before, she had gone to town with her father at Christmas time, and seen the gaily trimmed Christmas trees in the store windows. "There ought to be lots of little candles," she said. "Joe, we'll cut some big ones down—they'll make more, too, that way; and I remember mother telling how they used

to string cranberries for the Sunday-school trees. I can get some to-morrow. Oh, Joe, a tree and a pudding! It will be Christmas, won't it?"

As early as possible the next morning Betty was off down the trail to the store. On the steps she met Joe. "I say, Betty," he cried, "Carlin says I can stay on through the week—and take it out in goods—beforehand!"

"Joe! Do you think—I'd love a doll for Katie!"

"Sure!" Joe answered.

Fortunately, the assortment of dolls was not large, else might Betty's other shopping have been long delayed.

"But ain't you going to take one for Stella?" Mr. Carlin asked, as at last Betty made her choice.

She shook her head regretfully. "I'd love to, but—and Stella is eight."

Mr. Carlin picked out the brown-eyed mate of the blue-eyed doll, laying it on the counter. "Got time to dress two dolls?" he asked.

Betty's face flushed. "Oh!" she cried. And she made her other purchases in such a state of joyous bewilderment that Mr. Carlin was able to slip in various small additions of his own, right under her very nose, without her finding it out.

Betty went back up the trail almost as fast as she had come down. Once home, she spread her purchases out on the kitchen table, with a little sigh of delight at her own daring; and more than one quick cry of pleasure at sight of the store-keeper's contributions.

When the children came home at noon, though everything seemed as usual, there was an unmistakable Christmas atmosphere in the little place.

Katie noticed it first. "Something's happened," she confided to Ponto. "I dare say you know what 'tis—but I'm not going to ask, and Stella 'Vang'line shan't. neither."

After dinner, Betty made her pudding, and when it was in the oven, and was filling the kitchen with its spicy fragrance, she gave her attention to the dolls. Dressing dolls was a new experience, but she was a capable little body and she had her mother's machine. In the trunk she found a little white ruffled apron—that would make the dresses beautifully—for the other things she went to her scrap-bag.

Betty's thoughts keeping time to the soft, busy whirr of the machine, were decidedly happy ones that afternoon—it was all turning out so wonderfully well.

With the first sound of the children's

voices outside, she hid her work away.

Joe came home late, treasure-laden. He had a bunch of narrow colored tapes, a half roll of red crêpe paper, rather shopworn, and a small spray of holly—gleanings from his clearing up down at the store.

And while Betty strung her cranberries Joe cut the crêpe paper into long, narrow strips to be used in trimming the tree.

The next morning Betty was giving the finishing touches to the dressing of the dolls when Mrs. Daly came panting up the path. "I declare," she said, sinking into the chair Betty brought forward, "it ~~is~~ a climb up here. See here, Betty"—from under her shawl Mrs. Daly produced a basket—"I've brought you youngsters up one of my mince pies and a few other things. Jim says you're planning

to keep Christmas, but 'tain't to be expected that a child like you can get 'round to everything. You keep your place nice—that's sure. No, you needn't empty the basket. Jim can fetch it home some time."

"I can't begin to thank you," Betty said, gratefully.

"Well, I don't want you should try." Mrs. Daly rose. "I can't stop now; I've a heap of work waiting—I only wish I'd a girl like you, Betty."

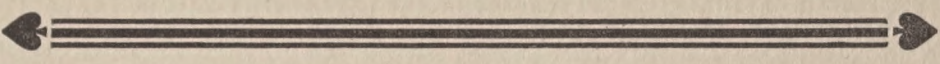
After Mrs. Daly had gone, the boy came with the "Company's turkey," and, closely following him, the children.

"I bet we've got the nicest turkey of them all," Katie said, prodding it in careful imitation of Betty.

It was at supper that night that Betty announced that all except herself were to hang up their stockings. "Mother used

to when she was a little girl back East," she explained; "she told me so."

And so, before Joe went back to the store, four long, lank stockings were hung solemnly in a row back of the kitchen stove, to be sniffed at wonderingly by Ponto.



CHAPTER VII

ON CHRISTMAS DAY

“**B**ETTY! oh, Betty!” Katie called.
“Are you awake, Betty?”

Betty murmured something drowsily; it was so early, and she was so sleepy and tired. The next thing she knew Katie was creeping in beside her. “Betty,” she insisted, excitedly, “maybe Dad’ll get here before we’re up and dressed—he’s got to come to-day, Betty.”

And Betty resigned herself to the inevitable.

Joe was down and building the fire by

then, and Jim was calling to them that if they didn't hurry out he'd look at their stockings, and even Stella was sitting up in bed and beginning to put on her things impatiently.

"I say," Jim called, "there're five stockings here now!"

The fifth one was for Betty. "Much too old you are!" Joe told her now, as she stood staring at it. And indeed, Betty did not look very old, as she curled herself up on the lounge, her stocking in her lap.

Very simple the contents of them all—a few nuts and raisins, a stick of candy, a red apple, and down in the toe of each one small gift. But they were Christmas stockings, and it was Christmas morning—and, above all, it was their first Christmas.

"But not our last," Joe said, determinedly, and Betty, running her little string



“IT WAS THEIR FIRST CHRISTMAS”

of blue beads through her fingers, nodded agreeingly.

Stella had found a new red ribbon in the toe of hers; Katie, her necklace of sea shells; the boys, a little neck bow of bright plaid.

Betty glanced from Katie, sharing her stick of candy with Ponto, to one and another of the little group; only one wish was yet unfulfilled; but Betty was enough a Flynn to tell herself that the day was not over yet.

At breakfast, where for a special treat they all had a cup of coffee and some of Mrs. Daly's doughnuts, it was decided to have the tree right after their mid-day dinner. "So's Dad'll be sure to be in time," Katie said, voicing the unspoken thought of the others. The morning passed, and even Betty had given up hope, when Katie, standing with her face

pressed close to the window, gave a cry of joy. "He's coming! He's coming! There's Skip!"

The next moment she was racing down the trail, followed by all but Betty, who simply could not leave her gravy at that particular moment. But she was at the door when her father reached it.

"My!" Flynn stared about the little kitchen. In the center stood the table, laid as elaborately as Betty's slender resources would permit; with a dish of apples and oranges in the center, sprinkled over with a thin layer of nuts and raisins. On the stove stood the turkey, filling the room with its fragrance; and on the little stand, borrowed from the bedroom, was the pudding and Mrs. Daly's mince pie.

"My!" Flynn said again; then his blue Irish eyes filled, for the table was set for

six; and the old armchair, at the head, the familiar knife and fork, told their own story of faith and expectation.

“But you can’t go in there—*yet*,”—Katie pointed to the half-open door of the best room, through which came the soft gleam of candle light. “Betty—she’s managed ev’rything like she thought you’d want her to.”

“She’s,” Flynn began, “you’re all of you, youngsters to be proud of. Looks like we couldn’t have a much finer layout, if we was multimillionaires.”

The dinner was a great success; and afterwards came the tree, and that, too, was a great success; those cut ends of tallow candle shining out among the branches bravely.

“Was ever anything so pretty!” Katie sighed, looking up at it with wondering eyes. And when her father, who played

master of ceremonies in the jolliest way possible, handed her down her doll, Katie's little face quivered with surprise and joy.

There was a present on that tree for each one of them; for Katie and Stella more than one.

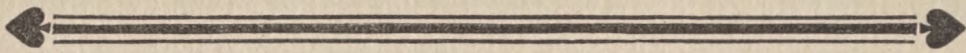
"Well," Flynn said, at last, as they gathered about the fire, Katie in Betty's lap, "you see I did get here, same's I promised—and it hasn't been easy, has it Skip?"

Skip, stretched out before the fire in lazy comfort, wagged sleepily; he and Ponto had already exchanged stories, and Skip was of the opinion that on the whole Ponto had had the best of it.

"I have lots to tell you later," Flynn went on; "but," he added mysteriously, "I have some business that I must attend to now; so you children

will have to wait until I get back.”

Of course, the little family was disappointed that he could not stay with them; but they spent a happy afternoon over their presents, and were really surprised when evening came on, and with it brought their father.



CHAPTER VIII

ANOTHER SURPRISE

SUPPER was over quickly, and then, to the surprise of the children, Mr. Flynn told them to put on their wraps, as he wished them to make an evening call with him. There was a merry twinkle in his eye and his tone was very mysterious, but he refused to answer any questions.

Soon the whole party was ready to start. Their father led the children straight to Mr. Carlin's. The store was in darkness, but Mr. Carlin's own house was brightly lighted. Before they could knock, the door was opened by Mr. Car-

lin himself, smiling and beaming on the little group.

Mr. Flynn looked at him inquiringly and Carlin, with a chuckle, answered mysteriously that "it was all ready." The children were told to remove their wraps and were then ushered in state into the parlor, where, lo and behold, stood a huge Christmas tree groaning under its weight of presents.

There was a wild shout of surprise, and Betty turned shining, questioning eyes on her father.

"Yes, daughter," said Flynn, answering the unspoken question, "I have made my strike at last, and I, too, am keeping my Christmas promise."

Mr. Carlin interrupted to explain laughingly how Mr. Flynn had interrupted him in the midst of his own Christmas dinner and insisted that the

store should be opened. The Christmas tree had been borrowed for the occasion from Mrs. Daly, who had had her own Christmas festivities in the morning; the store had been raided and ransacked; and the ladies of the settlement, with the awkward and enthusiastic assistance of Mr. Flynn, had selected the presents and decorated the tree.

What did each child get? That is a natural question; but it is very hard to answer. The Flynn children had been ill-clothed, and their playthings were but few, so that there was much that could be given them, and I believe that nothing was missing. Warm dresses and shoes and stockings for the girls; and warm suits and shoes and stockings for the boys. Hair ribbons and neckties, hats, caps, coats and cloaks, until each child had an entire new outfit.

Then came the toys; dolls and dolls' dresses and dolls' furniture, picture books and playthings of every kind and character for the girls, and skates, and tops and marbles and more books and more playthings for the boys. It really looked as if Santa Claus's whole pack had been emptied on and under that wonderful tree.

But, best of all, was the news that Mr. Flynn told Betty when they were once more at home, and the younger children had been put to bed, and he and she were sitting together before the open fire with her hand clasped in his, and her head against his shoulder. He told her of his final struggle for fortune and of his success; how, for weeks and weeks, there was only failure, but that finally the strike had come.

That there would be no more want and

no more struggle, and no more trying to care for the family on the pitiful sums of money which he had been able to provide. That he was wealthy, as wealth was considered by them. And then he made a new Christmas promise—that a good, capable woman should take care of the house and relieve Betty of the drudgery which she had borne so bravely, and that every Christmas there would be a celebration in memory of the way Betty had kept her Christmas promise.

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